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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s more than 100,000 refugees poured into the United States from Cambodia. This essay is intended to inform educators and others who work with Cambodian families about recent Cambodian history and traditional Cambodian culture and to create awareness of the social and psychological significance of these factors. The waves of refugees from Cambodia and their traditional culture are described. The history of civil war and invasion means that many Cambodian refugees add physical and emotional wounds to the difficulties they experience in adapting to life in the United States, including the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder. In the United States difficulties often arise between the generations in Cambodian families when children begin to adopt the behavior of American youth. Educational systems in Cambodia differ greatly from those in the United States, and adjustment to schooling is difficult for children and their parents. Cambodian immigrants have survived national and personal tragedies, and have emerged with personal strengths that must be recognized in finding ways to help their children succeed in school. Some recommendations are made for teachers. Eleven resources and five videos are listed for teachers. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

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CAMBODIANS IN AMERICA: COURAGEOUS PEOPLE FROM A TROUBLED COUNTRY

BY ALICE LUCAS

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CAMBODIANS IN AMERICA: COURAGEOUS PEOPLE FROM A TROUBLED COUNTRY

FOREWORD

I first became interested in Cambodia through the Khmer students in my middle school history class in San Francisco. What they wrote about what they had seen and experienced during the Khmer Rouge regime, and about the dangers and chaos of the refugee camps to which they had escaped, was in stark contrast to the apparent innocence of these children who came to my class every day. My students were eager to introduce me to their families and invited me to visit their homes and attend community celebrations, weddings and Buddhist rituals. I was impressed with the proud, intelligent people I met. On sabbatical in the spring of 1989, I traveled to Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos to experience the Indo-China region directly and to work in refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border about which my students had told me. The following year, I returned to Cambodia to teach English at the Institute of Economics in Phnom Penh. On my return, I agreed to write a background paper on Cambodia for the Zellerbach Family Fund's New Faces of Liberty Project.

The observations and information in this essay owe a great deal to the collaboration of two Cambodian associates, Silen Nhok, social work counselor at the International Institute of San Francisco, and Samol Tan, a co-worker in the San Francisco schools. I am especially indebted to Mr. Nhok for his insights about issues related to the struggle of Khmer individuals and families to adjust to life in America and to Mr. Tan for the historical background, summary of recent political developments and descriptions of the refugee camps. I would also like to thank other members of the Cambodian American community who have read this essay for accuracy and fairness. Any errors or omissions, although unintentional, are entirely my own.

This essay could not have been completed without the counsel of Dr. Paula Gillett, whose patient reading of many drafts helped to focus and clarify the content.

— Alice Lucas

SEEKING ASYLUM FROM TERROR

During the 1980s, more than 100,000 refugees poured into the United States from Cambodia. The largest groups of Cambodians settled in Long Beach, Calif., and Lowell, Mass. Other concentrations are scattered throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and in or near California's Central Valley cities of Stockton and Modesto. Elsewhere, significant numbers of Cambodian families are located in Washington state, Illinois, Minnesota and Texas, and in Philadelphia. A large percentage of them are school-age children. By early 1993, nearly 7,000 Cambodian children were enrolled in California schools. These children and their families are survivors of 20 years of civil conflict and a reign of political terror that killed more than a million people.

Now, in the safety of this country, Cambodians are reconstructing their lives around the opportunities and challenges of a new culture. Most are still haunted by memories of years of brutality suffered under the extremist Khmer Rouge government and in the chaotic and dangerous refugee camps to which they first escaped. They are continually anxious about the whereabouts of family members still missing in Cambodia and about those now living in unsafe areas of the country. The stress the adults feel as a result of these traumas often limits their effectiveness in their traditional parental role, adversely affecting the new generation of Cambodian children born in the security of this country.

The personal strength and endurance that have sustained the Cambodian people are dramatically demonstrated by the very fact that they are here in America. As teachers and community workers, we are better able to assist these children and their families as they adapt to a new life when we are knowledgeable about their culture and aware of the tragic events that have so radically changed their lives. This essay is intended to inform educators and others who work with Cambodian families about recent Cambodian history and traditional Cambodian culture and to create an awareness of the social and psychological significance of these factors.

THREE WAVES OF CAMBODIAN REFUGEES

The circumstances that precipitated the emigration of 300,000 Cambodian refugees from their war-ravaged homeland to countries of asylum around the world, began in 1973 when U.S. troops pulled out of Southeast Asia at the end of the Vietnam War. In spite of the continued support of U.S. military and civilian advisers to the government in Phnom Penh, the Maoist-styled communist government of Pol Pot continued to gain strength. In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge army entered the capital city and assumed power. During the next five years, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge carried out a careful and deliberate plan designed to destroy every aspect of Cambodian social, political and cultural life.

More than a million people died of starvation, brutal treatment and execution in the Khmer Rouge's attempt to eradicate the traces of Western influence and traditional Cambodian culture, including all aspects of the Buddhist beliefs and practices that are so central to Cambodian identity. After four years of what can only be described as genocide, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in response to repeated violations of its borders by Khmer Rouge troops. During the next few months, millions of half-starved people were released from Khmer Rouge slave labor camps and prisons by advancing Vietnamese troops. These are the Cambodians who fled to Thailand in the 1980s and then on to third countries around the world, including the United States.

The first wave of refugees was flown out of Phnom Penh in 1975, at the same time that U.S. government officials left the country. These early refugees were generally government and business officials and their families who had close ties to the United States. This small group had been exposed to Western customs and attitudes and have made a good adjustment in the United States. Many of their children have completed college and entered such fields as social work, education and business.

From 1975 to 1979, when Cambodia was in the grip of the Khmer Rouge, only a few Cambodians who had fled to Thailand, the country of first asylum, were allowed to emigrate to the United States. But after the Vietnamese entered Cambodia, and the plight of the Indochinese refugees in camps on the Thai border became known in the Western world, a second group of 10,000 Cambodians, sponsored by churches, individuals and communities, left for new homes in America.

The third, and largest, number of refugees arrived in the United States between 1980 and 1987. These Cambodians received benefits provided by the Refugee Act of 1980, which included short-term English language instruction, vocational training, health care and housing subsidies from public and private agencies during the first months after arrival. This early assistance helped many of the refugees to become completely independent in their new setting. Others, suffering from physical and psychological damage, have adjusted more slowly and have remained dependent on public assistance. At the time of this writing, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service does not include Cambodians among the groups eligible to enter the country as refugees or receive special assistance.

CAMBODIA: THE LAND, THE PEOPLE, THEIR CULTURE AND HISTORY

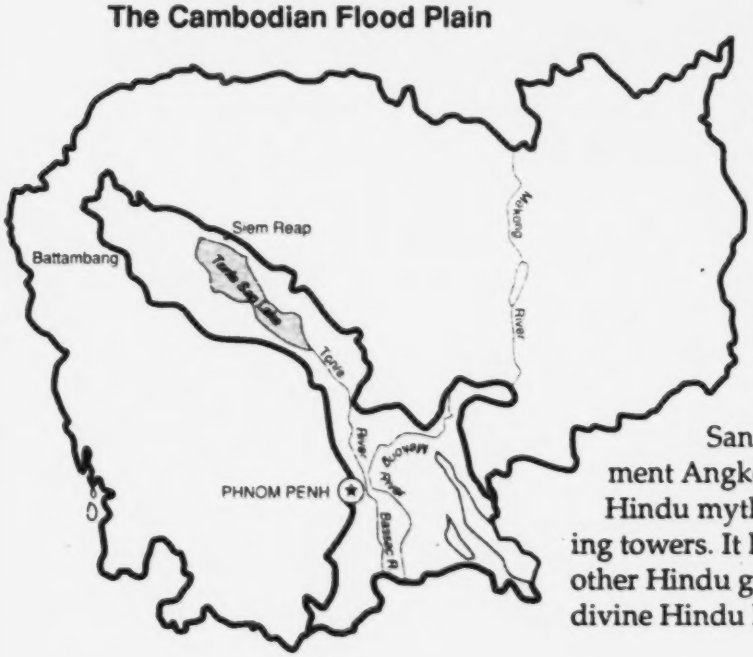
Cambodia is a small country, about the size of Oregon. It is bordered on the north by Laos, on the west by Thailand and on the east by Vietnam. Historically, it was often in the awkward position of being used as a barrier between warring Thailand and Vietnam and has lost land along its borders to both of these traditional enemies. The

country is ringed on the north, east and west by low, densely forested mountains that surround a rich, rice-growing central plain. On the south, key cities provide ports on the Gulf of Thailand. Cambodia's most prominent geographic feature is its great river system. The Mekong River flows south from the Himalayan Mountains, bringing rich soil from the highlands and joining with a vast network of smaller rivers that act as a drainage system, a water highway and a source of freshwater fish. The capital city of Phnom Penh, located at the confluence of three of these rivers — the Mekong, the Tonle and the Bassac — is a navigable inland port.

In an amazing annual phenomenon, monsoon rains during September and October swell the waters of the delta, forcing the flow upstream into the Tonle Sap Lake, increasing it to 10 times its size the rest of the year. Cambodians in America have pleasant memories of wading into the wide, shallow lake and using their bare hands or scoop-shaped baskets to catch delicious "elephant" fish. They often perform the "fish dance" at community celebrations to commemorate this traditional activity.

Earliest records of the inhabitants of Cambodia indicate that Mon-Khmer tribes migrated south into the country from China before the 1st century B.C.E. The descendants of these original people comprise the largest ethnic group in Cambodia, but the present day population also includes small groups of Chinese, Vietnamese and Muslim Cham as well as hill tribes who live in the mountainous areas bordering Laos and Vietnam.

The Cambodian Flood Plain



Khmer culture is in large part a result of Indian influence, which began in the early centuries of the Common Era. Traders from the subcontinent crossed the Bay of Bengal on ocean currents and seasonal trade winds. They introduced the Hindu religion, Indianized ideas of political organization, and the mythology, literature and art of India to the early kingdoms. Khmer script is derived from Sanskrit and the world-renowned monument Angkor Wat reflects the structure of the Hindu mythological universe in its five imposing towers. It houses sculptures of Vishnu and other Hindu gods, and its walls are carved with the divine Hindu handmaidens called Apsaras.

Cambodia's most famous monument, the magnificent city of Angkor Thom, was the home of the Khmer warrior kings. It was the center of an intricately constructed system of reservoirs and irrigation canals that made it possible to grow several crops of rice a year and to provide protein by breeding fish in ponds created by the water system. With a surplus of food, farmers were free to become the craftsmen who created the beautifully carved temples of Angkor Wat, still considered the largest religious edifice in the world. Cambodian students in America take great pride in this national cultural symbol.

Mahayana Buddhism, which came to Cambodia from India in the early 13th century, co-existed with the royal Hindu cults until the late 14th century, when Theravada Buddhism was adopted by the royal court. The Theravada Buddhist belief in predestination, the acceptance of suffering and the practice of merit-making (doing good deeds) was at odds with the opulence of the royal court and the virtual slavery of the masses needed to continue the building of the empire. The growing acceptance of Theravada Buddhism coincided with the gradual weakening of the Angkor empire.

Repeated invasions by Thai armies and attacks by the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang, combined with continued encroachment of the Vietnamese along Cambodia's eastern borders, forced the Angkor kings to abandon Angkor Thom. In 1353, a Thai army captured Angkor and the center of the Khmer empire moved south to the central plains. For the next 300 years, the country was buffeted by warring princes and eventually became a vassal state of the Thais.

The cultural exchange that resulted from these conquests includes the adoption of Theravada Buddhism by Laos and Thailand, and the influence of Cambodian music and dance, which was introduced to Thailand by slaves captured during repeated forays into Cambodia. These common cultural characteristics remain part of a shared Lao-Thai-Khmer heritage.

In 1862, the King of Cambodia appealed to the French to make Cambodia a protectorate in order to preserve its existence as a nation. The French, sensing the importance of Cambodia as a buffer state between Thailand and Vietnam, created the Union of French Indo-China, which included Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. French culture was introduced to the upper classes; children of the royal family and the court were educated in the French-style lycee. In the capital city of Phnom Penh, graceful mansions and broad avenues with generous esplanades were constructed in the French architectural style. The high offices of the colonial government were held by members of the king's extended family and elite, but the administration of the government and the operation of French colonial companies was done by Chinese and Vietnamese surrogates trained by the French.

Apsara

Centuries of Cambodian animosity for the Vietnamese, arising from repeated Vietnamese conquests along their common border, was compounded by the friction this caused. Relations were further aggravated when the French colonial government legitimized Vietnam's annexation of the Mekong Delta area. The ill will between Cambodia and Vietnam, backed by opposing super powers during the later part of the 20th century, exploded across the border many times prior to the Vietnam War. As recently as 1993, the unproved suspicion that Vietnamese troops were still in Cambodia was used by the Khmer Rouge as an excuse for refusing to comply with disarmament agreements made with the United Nations and participate in the U.N.-supervised elections. Khmer Rouge troops continued to massacre Vietnamese villagers, some of whose families have lived in Cambodia for several generations and who consider themselves to be Cambodian.

As with many aspects of Cambodian life, the very words we use to describe the people and the country represent the influence of French colonialism on traditional Cambodian culture. Cambodians call themselves and their language "Khmer" and their country the "Land of the Khmer." The French named the country Cambodia and the peninsula where it is located Indo-China, a historic, geographic and cultural reference to the influences of both India and China on this part of Southeast Asia. Hinduism, Buddhism and European culture with their many unreconciled points of contradiction are all part of what influences Cambodian self-identity. But Buddhism is central to Cambodian life and character and continues to figure in the customs and attitudes of Cambodians in the United States.

Saffron-robed Buddhist monks, the great towers and reservoirs of Angkor Thom, the lush green of rice fields and slowly flowing rivers of the rich countryside, and the

peaceful, joyous Khmer people themselves were what Westerners knew best about Cambodia until the mid-20th century. The contradictions between these images of Cambodia and the brutal killing of a million of its own people by the Khmer Rouge are a puzzle to Cambodian scholars and others who came to love the country and the culture. Perhaps part of the explanation lies in the overlay of cultural influences that are part of the history of the Cambodian people.

THE ROOTS OF CIVIL WAR

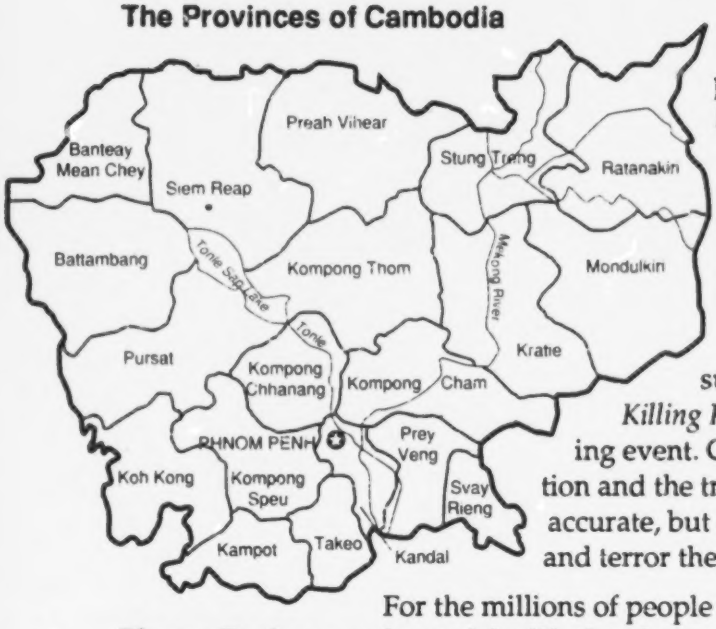
During World War II, the Japanese occupied Cambodia, but allowed the French Vichy government to continue to administer the country except for a brief period in 1945. Cambodia, under the rule of the French-installed monarch, young King Norodom Sihanouk, declared its independence from France in 1953. The king later abdicated his throne to take a more active political role in governing the country and in spite of increasing communist guerrilla activities in the rural areas during the 1960s, Cambodia prospered under Sihanouk's very personal style of leadership.

In 1969, as part of their efforts to cut the supply route from communist North Vietnam to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, the United States began a secret bombing campaign over Cambodian territory, ultimately dropping more tonnage on Cambodia than was dropped on Japan in all of World War II. Widespread corruption in the Cambodian government coupled with the massive destruction of the countryside by American bombers caused rising resentment among the mostly rural population and strengthened the hand of communist guerrilla forces, the Khmer Rouge. Friction developed between Sihanouk and the United States and in 1970, while out of the country visiting in France, he was overthrown and a U.S.-backed government was installed. The devastation of the countryside increased, causing hundreds of thousands of Cambodian villagers to pour into Phnom Penh. Corruption and inflation spread in the city and guerrilla warfare raged in the countryside between the Khmer Rouge rebels and government forces.

These rebels, led by Pol Pot, a Cambodian educated in France and trained by the Communists in Vietnam, were armed by China and toughened by years of jungle fighting. They gained respect and wide support among peasants resentful of domination by foreign powers and an urban elite. As the war in Vietnam was ending in the spring of 1975, and the United States prepared for a final withdrawal from Southeast Asia, Khmer Rouge troops rode triumphantly into the colonial city of Phnom Penh.

At first, they were welcomed as liberators by a population exhausted and frustrated by the war. But within a few hours, any dream of peace was destroyed. Khmer Rouge troops, some as young as 14 years old, forced everyone in the city from their homes and into the streets. All educated people, bankers, teachers, doctors were either executed on

The Provinces of Cambodia



the spot or, if they were able to hide their identity by pretending to be street peddlers or cyclo-drivers, were driven from the city into the countryside.

As the Khmer Rouge soldiers forced people out of Phnom Penh, U.S. government officials evacuated the city, taking with them 6,300 Khmer who had worked closely with the U.S. military or were members of the civilian government supported by the Americans. The film *The Killing Fields* is a powerful picture of this horrifying event. Cambodians who were part of the evacuation and the tragic years that followed say the film is accurate, but does not adequately portray the misery and terror they experienced.

For the millions of people left behind as the last helicopter left Phnom Penh, every facet of the life they knew ended. During the four years of Pol Pot's rule (1975-79), more than a million people died of starvation, disease, torture and executions. Families were deliberately separated, children sent to boys' or girls' work camps, babies left for strangers to care for. City people became the "new" people, forced to work extra hard, punished more severely and given fewer grains of rice than the peasants. In a country abundant with fruits and edible grain, no one was allowed to gather food from the forest. Grandparents, traditionally honored in Buddhist culture, were killed if they were too weak to work. No Khmer traditions were honored; there were no weddings, Buddhist holidays or burials. Monks were stripped of their saffron robes, temples were blown up. In the final days of Khmer Rouge rule, 8,000 men, women and children were purged from their own ranks, tortured to death in Tuol Sleng, a building that once housed a high school in Phnom Penh.

INVASION BY VIETNAM

In January 1979, Vietnam, in response to continued Khmer Rouge attacks across its border, invaded Cambodia. As the Vietnamese pushed the Khmer Rouge west toward Thailand, thousands of sick, half-starved people were released from labor camps and began to wander the countryside, looking for their families and returning to their villages. Many of those closest to the border crossed over the rugged mountain terrain, traveling mostly at night, seeking sanctuary in Thailand. Already weak and sick from years of abuse and

starvation, they had to pass between the heavily armed advancing Vietnamese army and bands of experienced Khmer Rouge fighters. Many did not survive the trip.

Tens of thousands of others poured into Phnom Penh, which lay deserted since the Khmer Rouge had expelled all residents to the countryside in April 1975. They found only the shell of a city with no water, sewers, electricity, food, medical facilities, no in-place government structure to assist them. The new government installed by the Vietnamese faced chaos in Phnom Penh. The infrastructure and social fabric of the country had been completely destroyed by the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese themselves were overwhelmed with domestic problems following their long war.

Cambodians are divided in their feelings about the Vietnamese invasion. Their ambivalence is apparent in their references to the Vietnamese action as "liberation" in one conversation and as "invasion" in another. The presence of the Vietnamese-installed government was tolerated, even respected by some as the only force that stood squarely against the active rebel army of the Khmer Rouge. But the presence of Vietnamese soldiers was feared and even families of Vietnamese descent who have lived in Cambodia for generations are resented and sometimes attacked.

Meantime, on the border frontier between Cambodia and Thailand, Pol Pot regrouped his army into rebel camps. Supplied partly by aid from the West and armed by China with the cooperation of the Thai military, Pol Pot established a government in exile and continued to claim legitimate rule of Cambodia. Two other rebel governments (Prince Sihanouk royalists and followers of the prime minister who succeeded him) fought both the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese-backed government seated in Phnom Penh. The United States and its allies, who along with the United Nations, saw the presence of the Vietnamese as a violation of Cambodia's sovereignty, refused to establish diplomatic relations with the Phnom Penh government. In September 1979, with full knowledge of the death, misery and destruction caused by the Khmer Rouge, the United Nations recognized its government, Democratic Kampuchea, as the legitimate representative of Cambodia.

The United States and its allies imposed an embargo on Cambodia, making it impossible to send relief supplies or equipment to help rebuild roads, bridges, dams, sewerage and water systems destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. There were no factories or industries to offer employment and no rice crop to harvest.

Faced with these seemingly unsolvable problems, and denied the help of the international community, thousands of Khmer began to flee the country, fed up with the bitter taste of communism under the Khmer Rouge and the new Vietnamese-controlled government. Cambodians said, "This is the same car, operated by a different driver."

THE REFUGEE CAMPS

Over the next few months, 200,000 Cambodians took refuge along the border between Cambodia and Thailand. Early in 1979, alerted by world concern for the plight of these refugees, the Thai government set up temporary camps and allowed the refugees to cross the border in relative safety. Some of the thousands who entered the camp included remnants of two rebel armies opposed to both the Cambodian government and the Khmer Rouge and, in some cases, Khmer Rouge themselves. Rival armies shelled the camps housing each other's soldiers, killing innocent refugees.

Conditions inside the camps were chaotic. There were no shelters, no toilets, insufficient water and food, and little medical help. The filthy, wet ground was a perfect breeding spot for malaria-carrying mosquitoes and disease was widespread. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by Thai government soldiers who often used brutal methods to control the chaos inside as refugees attempted to build shelters and guard their meager possessions. In November 1979, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees took on the operation of Khao I Dang camp, but the Thai military continued to control the entrance and exit of all persons and to guard the camp at night. Representatives of international nongovernmental organizations such as Save the Children set up basic food and medical services but were not allowed to remain in the camps after sunset. Conditions improved, but officially no additional refugees were allowed to enter the camp.

The influx of those escaping to Thailand continued throughout the next decade. As many as 300,000 Khmer lived in the refugee camps in the early 1980s. In addition to Khao I Dang camp, the three warring factions operated their own camps closer to the border. Refugees stumbling out of the forest to cross the border had no way of knowing which camps they were entering, and once inside they were not allowed to leave. They became pawns of the rebel faction that controlled the camp and the consignments of food and water supplied for the refugees were used instead by the camp commanders to rebuild their rebel armies. Young men and women were conscripted from the camp populations to either fight in the armies of the factions, or to carry weapons and supplies to faction depots in the jungle inside Cambodia.

HOPE FOR PEACE

A cease-fire and disarmament agreement was negotiated in 1990 with the three rebel political factions in exile on the border and the government of the State of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. But the cease-fire was frequently broken and fighting continued in the provinces in spite of the presence of U.N. peacekeeping forces. The Khmer Rouge maintained a strong army and refused to allow themselves to be disarmed. The other

three factions, which cooperated with the United Nations in disarming, were at a disadvantage in the on-going skirmishes with the Khmer Rouge.

In spite of this volatile situation, a U.N. transition team prepared for a first-ever democratic election to be held in May 1993. In response to the feeling of many Khmer that the four parties negotiating the cease-fire and the U.N. agreements were representatives of failed governments that were sponsored by the superpowers, 17 new parties registered to field candidates in the election. The election, the continued fighting in Cambodia and all the issues related to establishing a new government are endlessly debated by Khmer Americans. During the five days of polling, 93% of the people eligible to vote showed up at the polls in spite of Khmer Rouge threats of attack. Election results gave a majority of seats on the Constituent Assembly to members of Prince Sihanouk's party, and the prince assumed the role of head of state. Members of the prince's cabinet represented both his party and the government party in an attempt to bring peace as the country began the task of writing a constitution and establishing a new government.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Most immigrants who come to the United States live behind an invisible wall of language and cultural barriers in the first years of their resettlement. But for Cambodian refugees, there are physical and emotional wounds as well, which make adjustment in a new setting even more difficult. Anxiety about the survival and welfare of other family members who remained in Cambodia, or are scattered around the world by emigration from border camps to other Western countries, compounds the stress of the years of trauma they have experienced.

Sixty-five percent of all Cambodian adults who survived the violent years of the war and the Pol Pot era are women. Without the traditional village and market activities, which provided them with a sense of worth and a network of friends, they often live in isolation tormented by terrible memories. Those who are single mothers have a particularly difficult time raising their children without a father or family to turn to for help.

All Cambodians who lived through the Pol Pot era are thought by some researchers to be suffering from the same psychological problems observed in concentration camp survivors, combat veterans and other victims of mass violence. The symptoms, called post traumatic syndrome disorder (PTSD), include depression, recurring and intrusive recollections and dreams of violent events, spontaneous reactions to an event that is being recalled, emotional detachment, guilt, memory impairment and difficulty in concentrating. School and community agency workers who are not familiar with the symptoms of PTSD cannot always provide the help Cambodians need in the aftermath of their tragic experiences.

The dramatic increase in alcoholism, domestic violence and obsessive gambling — behaviors directly linked to untreated trauma — are a concern to mental health workers in the Cambodian community. On occasion, Cambodian parents, overwhelmed by traumatic memories and without the traditional support of family networks, express their frustration physically in the treatment of their children. Responsible reporters of child abuse should be careful, however, not to confuse signs of mistreatment with the marks of Southeast Asian traditional medicine practices such as cupping, which leaves round bruises on the body, and coining, the abrasion of the skin to stimulate circulation.

It is important for teachers and those who work with Cambodian families to be informed about Cambodian health practices and concerns. Medical personnel who work with Cambodian families report that most of the health problems with which Cambodians entered this country have been eliminated in children through immunization, improved nutrition and sanitation. Cambodian children living in urban areas do, however, suffer physical health problems caused by violence and crime, as do other inner-city children.

Among adolescent and pre-adolescent Cambodian children, emotionally based health problems are very common. Divorce, desertion and single parenting are not unusual in a society in which many more women than men survived a long civil war. As single parents change partners in an attempt to re-establish their lives, their children are expected to show the same respect to the new partner that traditionally is accorded a natural parent. The resentment children feel is suppressed when they are very young. They are taught not to question or challenge their parent's decisions. But as they reach the preteen age, they frequently act out against the decision of the parent. Runaways, gang activity, threatened suicides are too often the result.

BEING A PARENT IN AMERICA

In the traditional culture, the integrity of the family was of the highest importance. Children were taught to respect their elders at all times and in all matters. They were not allowed to ask questions or make eye contact when talking to adults. They had a major responsibility for the care of younger brothers and sisters and never contradicted their parents for fear of angering them. If children disagreed with their parents, they kept it to themselves. Under Khmer Rouge rule, all these allegiances were transferred to the political ideal of the central Khmer Rouge authority.

In the United States, difficulties often arise between the generations in Cambodian families when children begin to adopt the behavior of American youth. Cambodian girls are expected to be shy and obedient to their parents. Parents often refuse to allow their daughters to participate in after-school activities, or to accompany their friends to

movies and on shopping trips, fearing that their daughters will develop more assertive behavior. Boys are allowed much more freedom, but they too are prevented from participating in school activities by the responsibility of caring for family members, or by after-school jobs. Some Cambodian boys and girls work all night in family-owned businesses such as doughnut shops or collecting cardboard, cans and bottles for recycling and attend school all day. Because of family obligations, they are not always able to take advantage of the higher education opportunities offered to them by universities eager to enroll academically gifted students of underrepresented multicultural groups. With little chance for recreation and social interaction, and limited opportunities to escape the oppressive routines, depression frequently occurs among older teen-agers.

Some Cambodian parents and grandparents who cling to traditional ways insist on arranged marriages for their children just as the young people want to begin dating. They oppose their daughters' interest in boyfriends and insist that it is their responsibility to choose the man who is to be their son-in-law. Traditionally, girls are married very young, before they are old enough to make the choice for themselves, and this practice often continues in this country. If a girl defies her parents and dates a young man without their consent, parents often force their daughter to marry the boy, even if both are only 15 or 16 years old.

Cambodian parents who are not literate in their own language, and who have trouble with memory and concentration, find learning English is very difficult. They are dependent on their children to interpret for them in negotiations with landlords, social workers, health care givers and the like; this role-reversal is painfully humiliating in a culture that expects the total respect of children. As their children become proficient in English and forget their primary language, non-English-speaking parents are unable to communicate their expectations for the children's behavior. In the absence of sufficient guidance, many children follow the example they see in the media and on the street in poor, inner-city neighborhoods and become more and more alienated from their families. As one Cambodian social worker put it, "They do not know that hanging out on the street corner is not the American way."

Many young Cambodian parents in America were children and teen-agers during the Khmer Rouge era when the structure of the traditional family was deliberately destroyed. Children were punished for showing any feeling for their parents and grew up without memories of childhood in a family. Very young children were taught to spy on their parents and report everything they heard and saw to a central authority. Children as young as five were subjected to cruel work schedules and lived in constant fear of arbitrary punishment. Young adults were forced into marriages with members of other work teams without family members' consent or awareness and threatened with death if they objected.

Children and young people who matured in this setting developed absolutely no sense of personal autonomy. Every decision was made for them and they were punished for any demonstration of personal responsibility or individual initiative. These attitudes were reinforced by long periods of dependent living in refugee camps where food and clothing were rationed out to them and where there was no farming, no fishing and no commerce permitted to supplement the subsistence allowance that was provided.

The emotional distancing that once made it possible for these young people to protect themselves against the violent conditions in which they lived, now makes it difficult or impossible for them to care for their children. Their expressions of love and concern are erratic and foster a wary distrust on the part of their children. When the stress of memories of the past and frustration of life in an unfamiliar culture becomes overwhelming, they sometimes absent themselves physically or emotionally from their parental responsibilities and are unavailable to give support and guidance to their children.

American educators and others who work with Cambodian families may interpret the behavior of these young Cambodian parents as uncaring and irresponsible. But when seen in the context of these prior experiences, a clear understanding is possible. To an adult whose family relationships have been disrupted or destroyed by war, being a parent does not come from the experiences of childhood. But with the help of older, more confident Cambodians to provide advice and good role models, traditional Cambodian family values can be renewed and integrated with American cultural norms to create a vigorous new Cambodian American family structure. Many young Cambodian adults are entering social service and mental health careers, devoting long hours to counseling parents, mentoring children and working with American social service professionals concerned with the adjustment of Cambodian families to their new life in the United States.

CAMBODIAN BUDDHISM IN AMERICA

One traditional Cambodian institution continues to provide support to refugees in transition to a new life in the United States. Every sizable Khmer community has a Buddhist temple that is the center of the social and religious life of Cambodian adults. Traditional Buddhist rituals are followed in the elaborate wedding and engagement ceremonies so important to Cambodian families, ceremonies that were banned by the Khmer Rouge. Now, in America, even Khmer who have converted to Christianity incorporate the Buddhist traditions in family ceremonies such as weddings. Monks as well as traditional healers are often the first resort for cures for the physical and spiritual ailments of Cambodians in America.

Monks preside at seasonal religious celebrations held at the temple and in public

places. The Theravada Buddhist New Year, celebrated for three days in mid-April, is the most exciting of these holidays. American teachers, friends and community workers are often invited to share in the daylong celebrations. These are joyous occasions, with the whole family including elderly grandmothers, dozens of small children and teenagers dressed in their best traditional and Western clothing. Each family brings delicious curries, fish and rice dishes in elaborately hammered metal containers to share first with the monks and then with each other. The ceremonies are followed by games for teen boys and girls, and, in the evening, traditional dances and Western dancing to Cambodian rock music. Lao and Thai, who are also Theravada Buddhists, hold their own community celebrations on these days. Schools with even a small Cambodian population, sensitive to the cultures of their students, provide time for students to prepare a special New Year celebration with music, dances and traditional games in which the whole student body can participate.

As in Cambodia, where the temple or pagoda is the center of traditional village life, Buddhist monks here are not only spiritual guides, but teachers and healers as well and it is the monks to whom troubled Khmer first turn for physical and mental healing. More and more Cambodian people are using both the traditional routes to healing and Western therapy for their physical and mental illness.

"The temple in Cambodia and the temple in America are as different as heaven and earth," a Cambodian monk in an American Buddhist temple has said. "A temple should be in a field. In America it is inside, in an apartment or a house." But, he continues, "if Buddhism survives in America, Cambodian culture will also survive."

CAMBODIANS AS A COMMUNITY IN AMERICA

Almost without exception, Cambodian families arrived in the United States without any financial resources. Everything they had was either lost during the Khmer Rouge period, or spent in their escape to Thailand and to supplement the meager food and medical services provided in the camps. Upon their arrival here, refugee families received only minimal assistance from government and private social services. Even now, after years in this country, the only affordable housing available to them is in areas already occupied by disadvantaged minorities. As newcomers in these communities, they are perceived by the long-neglected poor and unemployed of the neighborhood as competitors for scarce housing, jobs and community resources. In the resulting confrontation between refugee and non-refugee residents, Cambodian families have become the bewildered victims of robberies, harassment and physical attacks.

Social service providers who attempt to counsel Cambodian families in how to tackle these complexities are hampered by family members' reluctance to seek help. The

discussion of problems outside the family is considered a loss of face. Without the traditional support of an extended family, and fearful of the stigma of revealing family problems to an outsider, the painful symptoms of their traumas go untreated. The passive acceptance of their suffering is at least partially explained by the Buddhist belief in predestination and merit in accepting suffering. These Buddhist beliefs, combined with the inability to control any facet of their lives under the Khmer Rouge, trouble many Cambodians in America to the point that they did not even acknowledge problems let alone attempt to solve them.

The Cambodian community itself is so fragmented and demoralized that until very recently it has been impossible to organize and develop a sufficient network of services to help these deeply wounded people. The most promising efforts to work with Cambodian refugee families are evolving as younger members of the community, familiar with Khmer culture, mature, enroll in university courses and prepare to take on the responsibility of assisting their people. The workings of the cumbersome bureaucracy of Western institutions like welfare agencies, which operate on a set of logical rules and organizational policies, are not understood by the Khmer people. They do not know how to meet the expectations of American social workers and teachers. They accept the authority of the teacher and the school and do not believe it is appropriate for them to question the operation of the institution. School and community meetings bring back memories of long hours spent in Khmer Rouge camp meetings, in which those who volunteered to work or spoke openly often "disappeared."

A long tradition of oppression of the lower class by kings, presidents and prime ministers created a two-tiered society in Cambodia: an elite class that controlled the means of production and a lower class dominated by the use of the military and police. Resentments against the ruling class of elites, long held silently by the lower class, fueled Pol Pot's recruitment of rural farmers into his Khmer Rouge forces. Social class divisions continue to play a role in the structure of life for Cambodians in America. Some members of the elite, educated class who feel the humiliation of living in poverty discourage their children from associating with the children of lower-class families.

Because of divisions among the supporters of the various Cambodian national political factions in the American Cambodian community, people do not trust each other and spend many hours involved in political discussions related to the current struggle for power in Cambodia. Suspicions that some members of the Cambodian community in the United States were involved with the Khmer Rouge occasionally creates barriers between families. Political differences and suspicion that those who return to Cambodia to visit are supporters of the controversial government currently in power are other causes of divisions in the Khmer community in the United States.

TRADITIONAL EDUCATION AND SCHOOL IN AMERICA

In prewar Cambodia, public education was available in urban areas, but seldom reached children in the countryside. Temple schools taught by monks instructed young village boys in the rote learning of the text of the Buddhist scriptures and, to a lesser degree, followed the traditional lycee curriculum proscribed in the public schools. In village schools, it was very common for children of different ages to be combined in the same class. Children were not moved ahead in the school system by age as they are in America, but by their ability to perform. In keeping with this tradition, many Cambodian parents in America recorded their children's ages as younger than they actually are in order for them to have as many years in school as possible.

In Cambodia, the school has traditionally been in complete control of a child's education. Parents do not question the teacher's methods, the curriculum or the policies of the school. Refugees carry these attitudes with them into the American educational context, teaching their children that to ask a question of the teacher or any adult is to cast doubt on the authority of the person in charge. If a student does not understand a lesson, he or she will not ask for an explanation. Nor will a parent ask the school to explain a policy. American educators need to convey to Cambodian parents, as to other immigrant families, their desire for the active participation of parents and students in the educational process.

Under the Khmer Rouge, schools were banned. Most teachers were executed and those who survived did so by masking their education and their profession. There were periodic attempts to revive education in the refugee camps, but classes were sporadic and materials were nonexistent. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees program developed some basic teaching materials that were used at Khao I Dang camp. All refugees coming to the United States spent from four to six months in a transitional camp just outside Bangkok, in Malaysia or the Philippines before coming to America. In these camps, basic English language was introduced to adults and children.

Although some Cambodian students excel in school here, and their number in California universities is increasing, there are many others who are in serious trouble at school, on the streets and at home. The drop-out rate among Cambodian high school students is estimated to be among the highest in major city school systems. Causes are many, including the absence of any formal schooling before arriving in the United States, years spent in the chaos of war and refugee camps and parents who are suffering from chronic depression.

Gang activities have been growing in Cambodian communities as a result of the weakening of cultural and family values. The many widowed mothers and divorced women in a society that is traditionally male-dominated, makes the rearing of sons difficult.

Gang activities are also caused by dysfunctional communities and the school system, which cannot provide a safe environment for children. There is a similarity between these circumstances and the lawlessness experienced in the refugee camps so that children who have experienced little else in their lives accept gang activities as being the norm.

In the long tradition of rule by the most powerful of competing leaders, Cambodian children have not observed adults using discussion and negotiation to clarify problems and seek resolutions to conflicts. When differences arise between individuals and groups in school and in the neighborhood, they most often resort to force to gain supremacy and maintain their individual and group power. So far, Cambodian role models who represent successful accomplishments in contemporary life are not widely known to children and teen-agers. In some communities, dedicated groups of university students and young professionals work with community agencies or act as big brothers and sisters for their younger countrymen who are at risk.

Schools lack support systems that can help Cambodian children adjust to a large, diverse population. When Khmer-speaking aides and community workers are available to work with Cambodian students, significant gains in building a positive, cohesive student identity can be achieved. Alienation from the regular school curriculum is another difficulty. It is possible, however, for sensitive teachers to include Cambodian history and culture as part of the curriculum. Parallels can be drawn between historic events in the United States and other countries, and events in Cambodia.

Difficulty adjusting to classroom demands is also a contributor to the increasing rate of Cambodian youth drop out. Many students live in very crowded conditions where doing homework is almost impossible, so they often come to school unprepared. They are frequently absent to accompany parents and siblings on missions where they are needed as translators. Unresolved conflicts with other children also figure prominently in school adjustment problems. Conflict resolution, a method of changing difficult student behavior, and cooperative learning classroom strategies can be especially helpful for students who are acquiring communication and negotiation skills.

Classrooms that employ cooperative groups in their instructional approach provide students with opportunities to work with each other in small groups to accomplish tasks assigned by the teacher. In the cooperative setting, every child has responsibility to the whole group to contribute by using the listening, speaking, reading, writing, artistic or organizational skill in which that child has strengths. Designing group membership so that all abilities, ethnic and gender groups are represented gives students a chance to interact positively with new information and ideas. Students who experience learning in group settings come to appreciate the value of diversity and to negotiate differences.

Using conflict-resolution strategies, students can be trained to handle conflicts that arise on the playground or in a classroom. Teams of students, often those who are themselves troubled, are trained by counselors to represent others who have had a disagreement. Listening is a key part of conflict-resolution techniques. Each party has an opportunity to present his or her view of the conflict without interruption and to tell the other what changes in their behavior could prevent future disagreements. The conflict-resolution team helps them to draw up a plan to avoid future conflicts. When cooperative classrooms are supported by student teams trained in conflict resolution, the tensions and stress between individuals and groups at school can be decreased dramatically.

Like child-rearing practices in many societies, Cambodian parents believe physical punishment is acceptable for small children. School teachers in Cambodia had the right to use physical punishment to discipline students who failed to do their work in class or to do their homework. In this country, the same behavior that is encouraged in Cambodia is considered illegal. Parents who punish their children in the traditional way are sometimes arrested for child abuse. This kind of cultural clash is most painful and difficult for school personnel and social workers to arbitrate.

While Cambodian children complain that they do not have as much freedom as their American classmates, their parents believe their children have too much freedom in this country. They say the law makes their children unafraid of them and when they try to discipline them, children threaten to call the police. When children have problems with school, parents put the blame on school which gives them too much freedom or teaches them the wrong subjects.

As children become more Americanized, rejecting their parents' traditions and their language, communication in either English or Khmer breaks down between the generations. Neither parent nor child has the vocabulary to talk about expectations or matters of ethics, morality, beliefs and behavior. Conversations are limited to the most fundamental operations of daily life. Children who translate for their parents often take advantage of these circumstances, giving the school inaccurate information about addresses and phone numbers, changing report card grades, incorrectly translating the messages in notices between school and home and manipulating their parents into buying expensive clothing and toys.

WORK IN AMERICA

Men in many of these families were farmers before the war and are without the skills to become employed in an urban setting. Entrepreneurial roles were undeveloped in the traditional society. Those who had a profession or business experience before the war had to hide their skills from the Khmer Rouge to avoid being killed. The only work for

anyone during those years was the back-breaking labor of rice growing. In the refugee camps those who had craft skills were forced into idleness because doing any kind of business was forbidden by camp rules.

Cambodian refugees and immigrants believe in the American Dream that hard work will bring economic success and they often say that the Khmer Rouge prepared them very well for the hardest kind of work. Eager to become part of the American free enterprise system, the earliest immigrants have become owners of a growing number of small businesses. Middle-aged Cambodians opened Asian food stores, restaurants, auto repair shops all over California, but especially in the Southern California city of Long Beach. In Northern California, two out of three franchised or independently owned doughnut shops, opened with little capital and run with the help of family members, are owned by Cambodians.

Many Cambodians who arrived in the early 1980s trained to enter professions that were not limited to proficient English speakers, such as accounting and the computer technology. Families pooled their money and opened successful food businesses. Both men and women have entered service industries or become skilled software engineers, computer programmers and electronics technicians. Others have found jobs as translators, health workers, teachers' aides and social workers. Parents often work long hours to provide their children with the material things American middle-class children have. In some families, both parents are employed, often working nights in a hotel or restaurant and days in an office or store. For others, there seems to be little chance for a secure economic future. Reduced levels of funding for refugee relief and training programs provide little assistance for those who do not have the confidence and skills to begin work life in America.

CONCLUSION

Cambodians living in America were the innocent victims of an inhumanity so great that it challenges the accepted meaning of life. Those Cambodians who have not only survived their national and personal tragedies but emerged with great personal strength are proof that the human spirit can heal and renew itself. Those who work with Cambodian families and their children have a great opportunity to support these courageous people as they care for their families and reach out to help others. The stories of the resourcefulness and creativity that sustained these families through years of brutality and terror under the Khmer Rouge and their escape to Thailand can be used to help students create an inspiring self-image. When combined with opportunities for positive interaction in social and educational settings where their story is known and respected, these youngsters can succeed.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS OF CAMBODIAN STUDENTS

• Find out something about the background of your students by encouraging them to write the story of their lives and their parents' lives. Provide them with biographies and works of fiction about other Cambodians as models for writing their own stories. One good source of other students' writings are the personal accounts of young refugees used in "New Faces of Liberty" and "New Faces in our Schools" curriculum guides published by the Zellerbach Family Fund*, and "Our Lives," a collection of personal histories to be used in the teaching of reading. (See Resources for Teachers.)

• When teaching geography, use the Himalayan Mountains, Mekong River, and Mekong Delta to illustrate concepts of river mouth, source, upstream, downstream. Compare climate and vegetation in Indo-China with countries in other tropical regions. Use Indo-China and Southeast Asia as examples of what makes up a region. In a discussion of ocean currents and trade winds, use the Gulf of Thailand to illustrate how culture and trade are influenced by these natural phenomena.

• Make reference to Cambodia in current events discussions. In history classes, point out accomplishments and events in Cambodian history that parallel the era of history in the social studies curriculum. Students respond very positively when they hear even a mention of their country as part of world history. For instance, the building of the great cathedrals in Europe compare well with the building of Angkor Wat. Both were done in the 9th to the 15th centuries and were of similar political and religious significance. Compare the development of water control systems in Cambodia as well as in the ancient civilizations of the Middle East and China. These are good research topics.

• Employ and use bilingual aides whenever possible. Research shows achievement of limited English-speaking students parallels that of all students when concepts are taught in their first language.

• Group children in primary language groups so they can use Khmer language to discuss the concepts taught.

• Use bilingual materials available from sources listed in the references section.

• Use cooperative learning strategies to provide opportunities for interaction. As pointed out in this essay, students respond well to working together to solve problems.

• Incorporate Cambodian folk stories and proverbs in the literature program. See the bibliography for suggestions. Ask your students to collect their own stories by talking about them with their parents and to write them in English to share with the class.

* Zellerbach Family Fund supports the development of educational materials that reflect the cultures of immigrant, refugee and minority children.

WORKING WITH PARENTS

• Hold parent meetings in the churches, apartment building meeting rooms and community recreational centers in the neighborhoods where the Cambodian families live. Always have interpreters on hand. Ask the families to prepare traditional food to share. Make it a two-way meeting: Allow time for parents to ask questions and to explain their expectations. When presenting any written information — for instance, how to read a report card or fill out a federal form — provide translations of the documents.

• Meet with parents in small groups to talk about American child-rearing practices. Ask what their expectations are and where they are disappointed in their children's development. Provide a case study of a Cambodian family who has similar child-rearing problems and encourage the group to generate solutions.

• Introduce Cambodian parents to the traditions of the school. They are often embarrassed by their ignorance of such American customs as providing cupcakes for school birthday parties and PTA bake sales, or buying valentines for their child to exchange with classmates.

• Celebrate Cambodian New Year at your school on or around April 15. Ask for help from parents to prepare food and train students to do traditional folk dances. (Classical dance is very difficult to learn but there may be classical dancers in your area. Check with Cambodian families.) The students know simple games similar to "Haki Sak," "Duck, Duck, Goose" and "Red Rover," which even high school students like to play during lunch and recess times during New Year celebrations, or which can be incorporated into physical education classes.

• Invite a representative of the Cambodian community to come to class to tell about his or her life in Cambodia and their work in America. Invite someone who has traveled or worked in Cambodia to show slides of the cities, monuments, countryside and people.

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